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AUTHOR Fasold, Ralph W.

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ABSTRACT

To focus on the problem of what an English teacher can do about nonstandard dialects, one must ask what English teachers hope to accomplish in the classroom. The concept used in this paper is that a dialect is a part of a whole language. Some dialects are accepted as standard; others are considered nonstandard. Many teachers, however, will object that nonstandard dialect should be eliminated because it keeps its speakers from thinking logically. Each dialect of English contains subtle distinctions, and the question of language usage has no bearing on inherent language ability. There are four areas of language skill traditionally discussed by applied linguists: hearing, speaking, reading and writing. Objectives in terms of each of these four areas should be based upon individual needs. The results of one experiment with black children demonstrate clearly the fact that children who do not speak standard English still may be able to understand it. Group references, moreover, play an important part in the use of language. An hypothesis still being tested is that learning to read is easier if the language of the reading materials matches the language of the learner as closely as possible. A similar situation may be true in the case of teaching writing skills. (CK)

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WHAT CAN AN ENGLISH TEACHER DO ABOUT NONSTANDARD DIALECT?

Ralph W. Fasold

In order to get the problem of what an English teacher can do about nonstandard dialects[1] into perspective, we should ask what English teachers hope to accomplish in the classroom. It may be that there are as many objectives as there are teachers, but I have little doubt that almost every teacher wants all of her pupils to be able to read well and to use correct English in both speech and writing. It will be my contention that reaching the objective in reading and writing may well involve some highly unorthodox procedures for children who speak nonstandard English. I am further going to suggest that trying to teach all students to speak correct English may not even be a reasonable objective.

What it means to read well is relatively clear. We expect every educated person to be able to read and understand any written material he is likely to use. But it is a good deal less clear just what it means to "use correct English in speech and writing." The whole issue hangs on the notion of "correct English." Contrary to the opinion of some teachers, there is no single set of rules which defines what is correct in language at every time and in every place. What is correct English for one person might be very incorrect for another, and vice-versa. This assertion is not new; linguists have been making statements of this kind for years. An analogy from mathematics is sometimes used as a counterargument. Just because

[1] There are numerous notions of the term "dialect" within and outside of the linguistics profession. The concept used in this paper is that a dialect is to a language as a piece of pie is to the whole pie. Just as one cannot bite into a pie which has been cut into pieces without biting into one of its pieces, so one cannot speak a language without speaking one of its dialects. Some of these dialects are accepted as standard, other are not so accepted and are considered nonstandard.

Dr. Ralph W. Fasold is Assistant Professor of Linguistics at the School of Languages and Linguistics, Georgetown University (Washington, D.C.). He served formerly as senior linguist at the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, D.C. He has published articles on nonstandard dialect and sociolinguistics and has co-authored, with Roger W. Shuy, their recent book Teaching Standard English in the Inner City.

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a child has always thought that 2 + 2 = 5 does not mean that his arithmetic teacher should allow him to continue to think so. Similarly, the argument runs, just because a child has always said "I ain't got none" does not mean his English teacher should allow him to continue to use this construction. But the analogy is a mistaken one. Relations in arithmetic have inherent truth value. The sum of 2 and 2 must be 4; it could not conceivably be anything else. Grammar rules do not determine something which is *inherently* correct. If grammar rules are properly formulated and understood, they are descriptions of how people happen to use language to communicate with each other. A grammar rule is correct only so long as it accurately predicts how sentences are actually used in a certain speech community. The same grammar rule becomes incorrect if the members of the speech community cease using the kind of sentences it predicts. A rule which is correct for one speech community becomes incorrect if it is applied to the speech of a different community in which the sentences it predicts are not used. A grammar rule which says that present-day English speakers use sentences like "Thou goest well" would be incorrect since it predicts sentences that are no longer used. In the same way, rules which disallow the use of "ain't" and the use of two negatives in the same sentence are incorrect for communities of speakers of nonstandard English. These rules would predict that a sentence like "I ain't got none" do not occur, but the simple fact is that they do occur. From another angle, the correct grammar for the same nonstandard English speaking community would not allow the sentence "I haven't any" since this kind of sentence does not occur. The most useful notion of "correct English grammar" is that a correct English grammar accurately describes how English is used by a community of its speakers. This implies that there are as many correct grammars as there are communities of speakers.

Many teachers, even if they come to accept the linguist's notion of correct, will still object that nonstandard dialect should be eliminated because it keeps its speakers from thinking logically. But linguists have found that logical thinking can be expressed in *any* grammatical system which has so far been investigated. Many linguistic scientists would agree that the ability to express logic is a property of *all* human language. If we examine what is objectionable in nonstandard English, we find from the point of view of logic, that much of it is very trivial. "He go to school" expresses the same concept as "He goes to school." The absence of the suffix spelled *es* does not obscure the meaning of the sentence; nor does it make it illogical in any sense. Most standard English speakers prefer the second version of the sentence simply because it is customary for educated people to use "goes" with subjects like "he."

Other sentences which follow nonstandard grammar rules instead of standard English rules strike some observers as defective. Sentences with double negatives, for example, are said to be illogical since "two negatives make a positive." But if we return to our concept of language as a communicative tool, we see the problem disappear. When a speaker of nonstandard English utters a sentence like "He didn't do nothing" he means "He didn't do anything" and his meaning is perfectly well understood by other nonstandard English speakers and—let us be honest—by standard English speakers as well. If a child who uses nonstandard English intends a negative sentence and his intention is understood, then there is no problem of logic, no matter how many negative words he puts into the sentence to emphasize its meaning. We cannot claim that there is something inherently illogical about sentences with double negatives unless we are prepared to claim that all French speakers, for example, think

illogically. French is one of several languages which *require* two negative words in common kinds of negative sentences.

A similar kind of reasoning applies to the use of nonstandard sentences in which the speaker "leaves out the verb," as in "They bad kids." It would be serious indeed if there were speakers who left out any verb indiscriminately, but it turns out that the verb "left out" by nonstandard English speakers is always "is" or "are." As in the case of double negatives, we find here that the predication relationship, which must be expressed by a form of "to be" in standard English, is perfectly well understood by anyone who speaks the dialect and by most standard English speakers. A look at the languages of the world reveals that there are several in which words for "to be" can be omitted without misunderstanding: Hebrew, Russian and Siamese being only three examples. There are also other points in which nonstandard grammar might be said to inhibit logical reasoning, but these examples are sufficient to indicate the futility of this line of inquiry.

Some distinctions seem to be made somewhat more readily in standard dialects of English than in some nonstandard ones. The distinction between "can" and "could" is one which some black nonstandard speaking children do not seem to control, at least in the same way the distinction is made in standard English. These youngsters tend to use "could" in sentences like "I could ride a bicycle" where "can" would be expected in standard English. On the other hand, there are other subtle distinctions which are easy to make in a nonstandard dialect which can only be made periphrastically in standard English. When a speaker of one black nonstandard variety of English says "I been done learned that," far from simply torturing English grammar, he is making an emphatic statement which cannot be made by using "I've learned that" or the like. The meaning here is that the speaker has learned the item in question thoroughly some time ago and it is superfluous to suggest he learn it again. The nearest equivalent in standard English would be something like "I learned that a lo-o-ng time ago" where a time adverb and intonation must be used to cover an area which is handily covered by the resources of the nonstandard grammar. On balance, there are probably about the same number of subtle distinctions which are possible in each dialect of English; they are just different distinctions.

The problem of language *use* is another issue which should be kept separate from questions of inherent language ability. It is quite likely that there are syntactic constructions present in a child's grammar which he is not accustomed to use in ways necessary for functioning in school. Carl Bereiter provides a classic example of this (Bereiter 1965: 200) although he mistakenly gives it as an example of language disability. Bereiter observed that some disadvantaged four-year-old black children cannot perform "simple 'if-then' deductions." He gives the following example:

> The child is presented a diagram containing big squares and little squares. All the big squares are red, but the little squares are of various other colors. "If the square is big, what do you know about it?" "It's red."

The child cannot make the correct response, therefore he is incompetent in using if-then constructions. But Bereiter himself goes on to admit:

> This use of *if* should not be confused with the antecedent-consequent use that appears in such expressions as, "If you do that again, I'm going to hit you," and which the child may already be able to understand.

In other words, even Bereiter would not deny that the child has the grammatical skill to at least interpret if-then constructions. One could even go further and show that a child who doesn't even use the word "if" still has still mastered the if-then logic. A sentence like "You don't stop messin' wif me, I'ma hit you upside you head" demonstrates mastery of if-then logic just as surely as "If you should continue to annoy me, then I shall beat you about the head." What Bereiter is calling a language disability is a question of use. The children he is referring to may be perfectly well able to use if-then logic. Their difficulty comes in applying it to Bereiter's problem concerning the colored squares. Incidentally, his problem strikes me as a formidable test of *any* four-year-old's ability.

In the light of these considerations, we can return to our consideration of what might be reasonable objectives for English teachers in dealing with nonstandard dialect. There are four areas of language skill traditionally discussed by applied linguists: hearing, speaking, reading and writing. We will consider possible objectives in terms of each of these four areas.

Although any teacher could probably relate isolated anecdotes about children who do not understand spoken standard English, it is likely that hearing is the area in which there are the fewest problems related to dialect differences. Even children who are most severely restricted to ghettoes come into contact with standard English from earliest childhood through television and radio. As a result, they gain considerable competence in understanding standard dialects, which are, after all, closely related to their nonstandard variety of English.

Dr. Joan Baratz (1969) has performed an interesting experiment which serves to illustrate this very point. In part of the experiment, she asked black children who spoke nonstandard English to repeat sentences in standard English. Many of these children did not repeat the sentences exactly but gave the nonstandard equivalent. What does this mean? It does not mean that the youngsters were so linguistically handicapped that they could not even repeat a simple sentence; in fact, a similar group of middle-class white youngsters were equally incapable of repeating sentences given them in nonstandard English. What these children had done was to decode the standard English sentence correctly and recode it in more familiar patterns. These results demonstrate clearly the fact that children who do not speak standard English still may be able to understand it.

Research which indicates that some children are poor at "auditory discrimination" (Wepman 1960) is received by linguists with some uneasiness for two reasons. First, it is a well-known fact that people are good at discriminating only those phonetic contrasts which are used to differentiate words in their own language. An English speaker for this reason would have considerable difficulty distinguishing the Siamese word *pit* 'to close' from the word *bit* 'twist' because of the special phonetic qualities of the Siamese *p*. In his turn, the Siamese speaker will have trouble distinguishing the English word *rip* and *lip* since *r* and *l* do not differentiate Siamese words. Similarly, there are certain sounds which distinguish words in standard English which do not have this function in some nonstandard dialects. Giving youngsters who speak such dialects an "auditory discrimination test" based on standard English is rather like giving an English speaker a test based on Siamese phonetic distinctions. A poor showing would not necessarily indicate difficulty in auditory discrimination in either case.

Another reason for poor performance on such tests is difficulty with the instructions, as pointed out by Marion Blank (1968). She sees these difficulties as indicating deficiencies in cognitive development, but they

are better understood as the result of culture conflict. Unlike the middle class child, the lower class child does not come to school expecting to play this kind of game with words, although as Thomas Kochman points out (1969) black ghetto youngsters are, or come to be, proficient in other kinds of verbal skills the middle class child knows nothing about. In general there is nothing the English teacher need worry about with regard to hearing in most cases.

The second major area has to do with speech. It is perfectly clear that proficiency in understanding standard dialects of English does not imply proficiency in speaking standard English. Proficiency in speaking standard English, then could be proposed as a goal for an English teacher to set for her nonstandard English speaking pupils. We have already indicated that there are two poor reasons for setting this goal. The desire to teach absolutely correct English is a poor reason because no variety of any language is ultimately and inherently "correct" in the sense that mathematical relationships are. Teaching standard English for the purpose of giving the children a basis for cognitive development is a poor reason because nonstandard syntax is equally capable of providing such a base. Nevertheless, another reason might be advanced for teaching standard English linguistic forms. Even if the contention that nonstandard English is correct for a child in some situations is accepted; even if there is agreement on the adequacy of nonstandard English for cognitive development, there is still the question of social acceptability. The use of a socially unacceptable dialect may well place a person at a social and economic disadvantage. No one would hire a young woman as a receptionist and switchboard operator if her grammar is nonstandard; and no one would hire a young man as an automobile salesman if his English is not acceptable to potential customers. This argument has considerably more merit than the other two, and is, in fact, the position taken by myself and Roger Shuy in the introduction to *Teaching Standard English in the Inner City* (Fasold and Shuy 1970). Nevertheless, I have more recently come to the conclusion that even this argument has a very serious flaw. To a large degree, what the English teacher does in the classroom with regard to spoken standard English is irrelevant. Speakers who start out speaking nonstandard English but find that they need to learn standard English will learn it, and those who do not will not, almost independently of what their English teachers do. The reason is that learning spoken language is unlike any other kind of learning. Spoken language cannot be taught only with the methods, materials and motivational strategies used to teach other subjects. I have serious doubts that one very necessary factor in learning new spoken skills, whether a new dialect or a whole new language, even *can* be supplied in the classroom. It is crucial that there be a viable expectation and desire on the part of the learner to become a member of the group represented by the speakers of the new language, dialect or style. If this factor is present, other methods and motivations may also contribute to successful learning of new spoken language skills. But if it is missing, nothing that goes on in the classroom can make up for its absence.

Psychologists and others interested in second language acquisition—which is different in degree but not in kind from second dialect acquisition—have realized the crucial importance of group reference to successful language learning. Discussing the learning of Hebrew by immigrants to Israel, Professor Simon Herman (1961: 162-163) states:

> If, as our analysis would indicate, group references play an important part in the choice of a language, it would follow that the readiness of a person to learn and use a second language may depend in part on the measure of his willingness

> to identify with the group with which the language is associated—or, at any rate, on his desire to reduce the social distances between himself and that group.

Whyte and Homberg (1956:13) found that this factor sometimes outweighed even inborn language-learning ability in predicting the success of U.S. businessmen in learning a second language in Latin America:

> A strong psychological identification with the other people and culture may more than make up for below average learning ability whereas a man of superior language ability may fail to make the necessary psychological identification and make poor progress.

John Gumperz (1966) gives an example which illustrates that absence of this group reference factor can nullify the tendency for people to learn the speech habits of those who have superior social status. There are three tribes in South India who have lived together for hundreds of years. Two of these tribes occupy a socially inferior position to the third. Yet members of these tribes do not learn the prestige language of the third tribe because the caste-like social system precludes the possibility that they will ever be accepted as members of the higher group.

If similar studies of second dialect learning were available, I am sure the same observations would be made. Without an expectation of acceptance on the part of the learner, there is small hope of success in language or dialect teaching. If this expectation is present, the new language or dialect is likely to be learned, even in the absence of formal teaching. Some nonstandard English speakers have such an expectation with respect to the standard English speaking community; others do not. I know of no really effective way that it can be provided in the classroom for those who do not.

I suspect that almost any English speaker can provide himself with a feel for the sort of rejection of prestige speech which is involved here. There are certain points of grammar which are taught as correct, and most standard English speakers will admit that they "should" use them, yet they don't. Some examples of these appear in the table below.

Rule	*One "should" say*	*One often says*
Use nominative forms of pronouns when they are the subjects of understood verbs.	He is human, just like you or I.	He is human, just like you or me.

Rule	*One "should" say*	*One often says*
Never end a clause with a preposition.	The slot in which it goes.	The slot it goes in.
Use "may" to request permission.	May I have another piece of pie?	Can I have another piece of pie?
Use "whom" as direct object.	Whom did you meet?	Who did you meet?
Make the *t* sound distinct from the *d* sound between vowels.	bet-ter	bedder

Most English speakers who have been through elementary school will recognize these rules as some of those which govern correct English. Yet I am sure that honest reflection will reveal that some or all of these rules are usually ignored in ordinary conversation. This poses an interesting dilemma. Why do so many educated speakers fail to use what they would

admit is correct English? Many people would say that they are just not as careful with their speech as they should be. But the reason most people are not more "careful" is that to follow these rules would actually render their speech socially unacceptable. Not unacceptable because it is "sloppy" but unacceptable because it would be considered "snobbish." In essence, what this behavior means is that we do not really aspire to membership in the kinds of social circles where such rules are really followed. If we were to base our speech on this kind of rules, we know we would soon gain a negative reputation among our friends and acquaintances for "putting on airs." In spite of this eminently good reason for not using this variety of English, most Americans still have the vague feeling that speech is basically careless and that we really should follow the rules. A very similar situation exists for some nonstandard English speaking youngsters. They may well have the feeling that their speech is not as good as it should be; they may even be able to cite the rules they are violating. But the cost in terms of damaged reputation among their peers is so high that the assumption of standard English forms is not likely to take place unless they begin associating with youngsters who use standard English. The average schoolteacher probably will not find himself in the position to join the "upper crust" of society, but if this opportunity were to arise, I have no doubt that the teacher would fairly quickly and largely unconsciously adopt the speech appropriate to that social class. Similarly, a nonstandard English speaking individual, if he feels that he has a viable chance to become a member of a social group which uses standard English, and if he desires to do so, will also fairly quickly and largely unconsciously adopt standard English—and probably not before.

In summary then, language or dialect learning is a unique kind of learning which depends very heavily on a psychological factor of group reference. If this is not present, the best efforts of the English teacher is in grave danger of being completely nullified. If it is present, nonstandard dialect speakers can be expected to learn standard English, with or without formal teaching.

By continually correcting the children in her class, the teacher is capable of having an effect. She can succeed in giving the children a profound sense of linguistic insecurity and doubt about their language and even their personal worth. The teacher can easily have a negative effect but has a slight chance of actually teaching spoken standard English.

The third area of language with which an English teacher might be concerned is reading. The goal of teaching every student to read is a legitimate one. The best suggestion that linguists have been able to make with regard to reading has to do with the match between the language of the learner and the language of the reading materials. The hypothesis is that learning to read is easier if the language in the reading materials matches the language of the learner as closely as possible. For speakers of nonstandard English, this means that the materials used in beginning reading be constructed in accordance with the rules of nonstandard grammar. This hypothesis is currently being tested for children who speak black nonstandard English by the Chicago Board of Education and independently by the Education Study Center in Washington, D.C. To my knowledge, neither organization has published the results of their experiments, but the procedure seems reasonable. I will say no more here about reading, but further discussion of teaching reading to nonstandard dialect speakers is to be found in Wolfram 1970, Stewart 1969 and Wolfram and Fasold 1969.

With regard to writing, it may be important to take a hard look at just what kinds of writing are likely to be needed by a given group of non-

standard dialect children. Perhaps it would be more realistic to focus on writing personal and business letters and on answering questions on various forms than on developing the ability to write a literary critique of a short story, novel or poem. In some of these styles, personal letters for example, it may be unnecessary to insist that every detail of standard English grammar be observed. If a personal letter is to be written to a peer, there would seem to be little point in writing it in a "foreign" standard dialect. However in business letters, in filling in forms and in other official kinds of writing, only standard English grammar is accepted as correct and the ability to use it is a justifiable goal for an English teacher to set for all her students. In the process, it would be useful for the teacher to be able to distinguish three categories of errors. (1) There are errors of organization and logical development of arguments and similar difficulties. This kind of problem will be shared by all students regardless of dialect and linguistics has nothing to say about how such problems should be dealt with. (2) Then there are spelling and grammatical errors based on interference from a nonstandard dialect. In a study of written compositions by black inner city students admitted to a major university, over 40% of the errors found were due to dialect interference. (3) Finally, there are errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar which are not traceable to dialect interference.

A variety of apparent errors in the written work of nonstandard English speaking people are not errors in the strictest sense at all. They are simply the reflection in writing of the differences in grammar, pronunciation and verbal expression between the nonstandard dialect and the standard one by which the writing is being judged. In the area of grammar, when one of the university freshmen mentioned above wrote "Keith attitude" when standard English would call for "Keith's attitude" he was merely reflecting the rules of his nonstandard grammar. In standard English, this kind of possessive construction requires *'s*. According to the rules of the nonstandard dialect in question, *'s* may be used, but does not have to be. When another of these students spelled "closest" as "closes," he revealed that his pronunciation rules allow the elision of the *t* sound after *s* at the end of a word. Other cases arise when a writer uses an expression current in his speech community but perhaps unknown to the teacher. When one of the university freshmen wrote "Keith had negative changes about De Vries," he was using a common expression among black people. In this context, it means that Keith went through a change of opinion about De Vries. A teacher unfamiliar with the expression "to have changes" or "to go through changes" might well treat this expression as an error.

Other spelling, grammar and style errors occur which cannot be traced to dialect interference and should be considered genuine errors. In the same set of compositions discussed above, the misspellings "laied" for "laid" and "tring" for "trying" were observed. There is no pronunciation feature of the nonstandard dialect involved which would account for these spellings. In grammar, the use of the clause "in which you live in" is not called for by the grammar of any nonstandard dialect. An example of what might be called a style problem is the expression "in results of this," presumably for "as a result of this." All of these usages, along with mistakes in capitalization and punctuation, are appropriately treated as errors unrelated to dialect conflict.

This division into dialect and general errors has at least two implications for teaching writing. In a real sense, the dialect related "errors" are not errors at all, they are correct usages based on a different grammar rule system. Since this is the case, their correction is perhaps not as urgent

as the corrections of mistakes which are not founded on *any* rule system. This may mean that several writing exercises would be allowed to go by with no mention being made of the dialect related errors. In some styles of writing, personal letters perhaps, elimination of dialect interference errors might not ever be appropriate.

In order to carry out such a teaching strategy, of course, it would be necessary for the teacher to be able to identify which mistakes are which. This same ability carries over into the areas of reading and speech as well. If a teacher were to follow the suggestion of some scholars (Goodman 1965, Wolfram 1970) that nonstandard English speaking children be allowed to read aloud in their own dialect, the teacher would have to know what is correct in the dialect so that she could distinguish dialect readings from misreadings. In the area of speech, the teacher needs this ability to distinguish dialect pronunciations from genuine speech impediments.

A case can be made for requiring teachers of youngsters with nonstandard dialects to be trained in the grammatical and pronunciation rules of nonstandard dialects of English. In the past, of course, very little of this has been done. There are a few sources to which an interested teacher could go to find partial descriptions of some nonstandard speech. McDavid (1967) provides a list of common nonstandard features from a number of dialects. Fasold and Wolfram (1970) give a semitechnical description of most of the features of the kind of nonstandard English used by urban black people. The Board of Education of the City of New York (1967) has prepared a booklet, distributed through the National Council of Teachers of English, which deals with the nonstandard kinds of English found in that city. None of these descriptions, however, is completely adequate.

There is much an observant teacher can do on his own to distinguish dialect features from more basic difficulties. To do this, he must accept a basic linguistic rule-of-thumb: everyone speaks his language correctly. If several youngsters use the same "bad grammar" feature consistently, it is safe to assume that their dialect rules call for that very construction. Sometimes, one child may seem to have speech problems different from his agemates. His difficulties are likely to be due to some other cause than dialect interference. All speakers of any language occasionally make mistakes because of "slips of the tongue" and nonstandard dialect speakers are no exception. But no speakers make the same slips all the time; if it seems that a speaker constantly makes the same "mistakes" he is no doubt following the grammar of another dialect. If a teacher accepts this rule-of-thumb and applies it carefully in observing his students, he will soon find himself able to make the necessary distinctions.

The answer to the question posed in the title of this article is first, that an English teacher probably cannot do very much about his pupils' spoken language habits and very likely would not want to if he could. What the teacher should do about nonstandard dialect in the teaching of reading may well turn out to be "use it." Finally, in teaching writing skills, a teacher should learn that there are more crucial aspects of writing than dialect related areas and that some writing styles may allow for continued use of dialect constructions.

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